



**Assessing the Impact of  
Microenterprise Services (AIMS)**

Management Systems International  
600 Water Street, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20024-2488  
Tel: (202) 484-7170 • Fax: (202) 488-0754  
E-mail: aims@msi-inc.com

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**Highlights and Recommendations of the  
Second Virtual Meeting of the  
CGAP Working Group on  
Impact Assessment Methodologies  
April 14-28, 1998**

**by Monique Cohen, USAID  
and  
Gary Gaile, Management Systems International**

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# **HIGHLIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SECOND VIRTUAL MEETING OF THE CGAP WORKING GROUP ON IMPACT ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGIES, April 14 – 28, 1998:**

## **DEVELOPING LOWER COST MICROENTERPRISE IMPACT ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGIES FOR MICROENTERPRISE PROGRAMS**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The second virtual meeting of the CGAP Working Group on Impact Assessment Methodologies,<sup>1</sup> held April 14-28, 1998, follows on the successful first virtual meeting of the Working Group held in April 1997.<sup>2</sup> The goal of the first meeting was to address methodological options for the conduct of impact assessments (IAs). Building on recommendations from the first meeting, the goal of the second meeting was to move toward the development of guidelines for “middle-range” impact studies. The impetus for developing guidelines for such middle-range impact assessments grew out of the expressed wish of the industry for credible, lower-cost studies that can be used as management tools by practitioners while also providing evidence of accountability.

Middle-range tools, by definition, require methodological trade-offs. The nature of these trade-offs, and their implications in terms of credibility, effectiveness, and usefulness of findings were the major topics of the second virtual meeting. While the value of high-end and low-end studies is recognized, the meeting agenda focused on forging a consensus on what comprises a middle-range impact assessment and developing guidelines for such approaches.

Prior to the virtual meeting, members of the Working Group voluntarily submitted background papers (see Annex 1). These documents, which included impact assessments from Africa, Asia, and Latin America were used to inform preparation of a discussion paper for the meeting.<sup>3</sup> The virtual meeting

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<sup>1</sup> Members of this CGAP (Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest) Working Group include: Chair, Monique Cohen, USA, Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, UK. IFAD, ILO, UNDP and PAG members, Renee Chao-Beroff of CDIR and Ela Bhatt of SEWA.

<sup>2</sup> For further information on the first Virtual Meeting see Monique Cohen and Gary Gaile, “Highlights and Recommendations of the First Virtual Meeting of the CGAP Working Group on Impact Assessment Methodologies, April 7-19, 1997,” (AIMS Project, Washington D.C.: Management Systems International, 1997) and David Hulme, “Impact Assessment Methodologies for Microfinance: A Review,” (Washington D.C.: Management Systems International and CGAP, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Jennefer Sebstad, “Developing Lower-Cost Impact Assessment Methodologies for Microenterprise Projects,” (AIMS Project, Washington D.C.: Management Systems International, 1998). This and other AIMS papers are available at the website: <http://www.mip.org>.

brought together 36 participants from donor agencies, research institutions, and practitioner organizations across the globe (see Annex 2). Using e-mail and a “listserve” created for the meeting, the moderated discussion took place in real time in Namibia, Australia, Ethiopia, the Philippines, several European countries, and the U.S.<sup>4</sup>

The discussion paper was praised by all participants. It was not only valuable in setting the stage for the virtual meeting and guiding much of the debate, but was also acknowledged as important in directing readers as they seek to apply and refine the guidelines.

The virtual meeting focused on three primary topic areas relating to middle-range IAs. These topic areas were

- C credibility;
- C cost effectiveness and usefulness; and
- C development of guidelines.

Suggested guidelines for middle-range impact assessments were voted on at the conclusion of the virtual meeting in an endeavor to identify areas of consensus. Points of consensus are indicated throughout the paper. The conclusion draws on the nascent guidelines and provides participants’ recommendations for next steps and future work on developing approaches to middle-range impact assessments.

## **CREDIBILITY**

The discussion paper listed six key elements of credible impact assessments:

- ! clearly stated objectives;
- ! a small set of focused hypotheses;
- ! well-defined and reliable variables and measures;
- ! well-designed and documented data-gathering instruments;
- ! methods that allow for establishing plausible association between interventions and measured changes; and
- ! a design that generates information useful for improving program performance and impact.

Only a few of these elements were discussed in detail. Others were mentioned in passing.

The discussion opened with a debate around the audience, and thus the objectives, of an impact assessment. While acknowledging the requirements of accountability, participants stressed the importance of using impact assessments as management tools for aiding practitioners to better attain program goals. Within this general consensus on the objectives of impact assessments, certain

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<sup>4</sup> A moderator, Gary Gaile of the University of Colorado, facilitated the meeting. Management Systems International was responsible for the management of the meeting.

opposing views among participants are worth noting. One noted that credibility is “audience sensitive,” while another disagreed with the majority by arguing that the “question of audience is not relevant.”

The tendency to limit the audience for impact assessments primarily to managers of microfinance institutions (MFIs) and donors was questioned by several participants. While agreeing that managers want and need this information, participants called for greater inclusion of MFI clients. In light of broadening the objective of impact assessments beyond accountability, one participant argued that clients’ perception of meaning and value of participation can provide insights into how the quality of services might be improved. Expanding the definition of clients to include village leaders, local authorities, etc., and including poor peoples’ perception of change in poverty were also proposed. Moreover, clients can play a valuable role in and can benefit from the impact assessment process. For instance, one member called for integrating clients into the design and evaluation process and advocated client self-evaluation. While there was general agreement, questions were raised about the practicalities of incorporating clients. Among the questions posed were the following:

- “How and at what stage should this be done?”
- “Are there low cost ways to do this?”
- “What is the feasibility of doing this in a large sample?”

**CONSENSUS POINT:** Incorporate client satisfaction as part of impact assessments.

One strategy proposed that credibility could be enhanced by placing more emphasis on the development of well-defined and reliable variables and measures. This would entail a more precise selection of the limited number of indicators to be analyzed. In addition, data-collection instruments should be designed to facilitate information entry and retrieval, and practitioners should use the data in their own internal evaluations. Finally, if IA data are to be collected by MFI staff, it should be seen as an opportunity to build local capacity within the MFI.

**CONSENSUS POINT:** Use a limited number of indicators.

Considerable debate centered on credibility issues related to the design and documentation of data-gathering instruments. In light of the goal of seeking middle-range approaches to impact assessment, the validity of data collected by staff, especially at the time a client enters a program, emerged as a key issue. It is recognized that much of the information needed by an MFI to assess the “bankability” of clients could also serve as baseline data for impact assessments. Indeed, in many instances the appropriate information is already or could easily be included on a client application form. One participant argued that provision of baseline information should be a condition for receiving a loan and should include, at a minimum, data on housing and assets. In response to a concern about the reliability of such data, it was pointed out that reliability could improve markedly with training and supervision. Another participant suggested that if the baseline form were designed by an external team and the staff collect data with care and integrity, the reliability of information would be

enhanced. Attention also needs to be given to having data that practitioners can readily retrieve and use. Both the experience of ADEMI in the Dominican Republic and, more recently, Workers Bank in Jamaica were mentioned as examples of institutions that maintain ongoing client databases.

**CONSENSUS POINT:** Use a carefully designed IA which ensures transparency and external review/oversight.

It is clear that collecting data from clients entering a microfinance program can significantly reduce costs of IA data collection. However, questions regarding staff capacity and reliability of the data were raised. Questioned were the quality of the data generated by MFI staff, the validity of data collected by “vested interests,” and the biasing of data as a consequence of “agents’ incentives.” When additional data collection is an extra task, there is little incentive for overburdened MFI staff to carefully collect the information. A strong argument was made that, while baseline data could be collected by program staff, follow-up data should be collected by an external team to assure the credibility of the IA. In any case, data collected by the MFI at the outset could be used to triangulate with other data collected by external evaluators. One participant claimed that “credibility will always be questioned” and another worried about the MFIs’ willingness to share the results.

**CONSENSUS POINT:** MFIs should carefully gather data from clients upon entrance to the program. Testing the practicality as well as assessing the cost of collecting such data by MFIs could begin with a focus on basic indicators that are relatively easy to collect.

Use of a comparison or control group to permit “establishing plausible associations between interventions and measured changes” is another element of credibility that drew significant commentary. Also a subject of discussion in the first virtual meeting, the need for some form of comparison or control group to credibly identify program impacts was reinforced. Yet, the designation of the control group remains a subject of considerable debate. In response to a suggestion that entrants into a program be used as the comparison group, a concern was raised that “starting conditions” may be dissimilar. It was argued that IAs should use “the most appropriate” comparison group. Throughout the discussion, several concerns were raised about the true comparability of groups both within a program and between programs on several important variables, including initial income status.

**CONSENSUS POINT:** Preference should be given to the use of non-clients versus new clients as comparison groups in IAs. However, the higher cost of this approach, the need to establish an appropriate sample of non-clients, and other limitations of this recommendation are well recognized.

In stressing the importance of the time element in IAs, Sebstad (1998) proposes the “use of a longitudinal design, if possible” to enhance credibility. Early in the debate, a participant argued that using cross-sectional or retrospective techniques was a means of significantly reducing IA costs. This

is a clear example of a trade-off that can lower cost. While studies conducted at more than one point in time are more reliable than one-time studies reliant on retrospective data, the cost of the latter studies is significantly lower and they still retain some credibility if properly done.

“Systematic analysis of the data collected” is a further credibility element highlighted in the discussion paper. The proposition was put forward that the most sophisticated statistical methods are not a necessity. Moreover, to lower costs, some trade-offs in level of statistical analysis should be considered. There was recognition that for most IA purposes a lower cost study can still provide valuable information, without the necessity of high levels of statistically significant output (which can usually only be attained by high-cost, large sample size surveys). One participant suggested that a confidence level of 80% could be considered sufficient for most purposes (versus the more common 95% and 99% levels). This would seem most adequate where IAs are to be used as management tools.

**CONSENSUS POINT:** In the absence of baseline data, use retrospective techniques. However, the choice of such a lower-cost approach should also recognize that there is a valid and important role for some precise data (interval data).

## **COST EFFECTIVENESS AND USEFULNESS OF IMPACT ASSESSMENTS**

Lowering costs of IAs has been an expressed goal of the Working Group since its inception. Yet, “what are the limits of lowering the costs of IAs without seriously reducing their credibility?” Posed by the moderator, the question drew several insightful responses. Incorporating plans for an IA as early as possible into the design and implementation of a microfinance program is seen as an effective way to prepare for lower-cost studies. In this way, consideration can also be given to different ways to take advantage of data-collection opportunities during the implementation process, including surveying entrants to the program. Earlier implementation of IA studies has the potential to lower the cost of both design and sampling procedures. Further, they could permit the establishment of a clear baseline if done at inception. Baseline data should be collected early and carefully and guidelines for this data collection should be set. This would permit the generation of “more timely, thus more useful” data for MFI management.

**CONSENSUS POINT:** Incorporate plans for impact assessments into the program design and implementation process as early as possible.

Meeting participants recognized that lower-cost studies are attractive because they are quicker to execute, thus providing answers faster. However, “can we get more with less, ...if we use innovative techniques?” one participant asked. By reducing the hypotheses (and thus the variables) to a smaller set, tailoring the IA to the needs of the sponsor, and scaling down expectations of the statistical analysis the answer would appear to be “yes.”

The choice exists for obtaining data on the direction, pattern, or degree of change for specific

variables. However, we should recognize that precise measurement is difficult, and at best we can obtain estimates of the degree of change (interval data). For some hypotheses and variables, direction of change should suffice. At the same time, if a variable can be measured more precisely, it should be. Meeting participants recognized that greater specificity on certain variables will always be desirable. Moreover, the accuracy of estimates varies by variable, and some variables are more relevant than others. It was noted that over time, movement from direction to more specific change measures can be accomplished as the results of IAs emerge and tools are developed and fine-tuned.

**CONSENSUS POINT:** Measure direction of change versus exact change where appropriate.

Several participants noted that there is still a place for more rigorous and more costly studies. Only with a larger study will it be possible to compare the cost-effectiveness of microfinance and other anti-poverty programs. Moreover, much could be learned if such a complex study were conducted in parallel with lower-cost studies to identify proxy indicators of complex phenomena and directions of change so that these could be used in smaller studies. It was pointed out that BRAC conducts two types of in-house IAs: rapid evaluations based on management needs, and more in-depth examination of client-level impacts.<sup>5</sup> These are in addition to the high-end IAs. It was also pointed out that ideally, the level of study should be matched to the needs of the donors and practitioners using the information.

In recommending lower-cost alternatives such as cross-sectional or retrospective techniques, the time period covered by the impact assessment needs to be carefully considered. Naturally, an IA is only relevant after sufficient time has passed for the impacts to be manifested. In addition, for a middle-range IA it is desirable to wait until some degree of program stability has been attained, and program adjustments are made. Yet, low-cost, rapid assessments that generate impact data might be very valuable at an early stage to help fine-tune a program.

**CONSENSUS POINT:** Careful consideration needs to be given to the time period covered by an impact assessment.

As noted earlier, participants supported the role of impact assessments informing program management. Sebstad (1998) notes seven ways “that impact information can be useful for improving institutional performance.” These seven goals served as the basis for some discussion (see box 1).

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<sup>5</sup> Concrete examples of the rapid, focused assessments include studies that examine staff or client drop-out rates, savings policy, and the profitability of different microenterprises.

### **Box 1: Linking Impact Assessment and Institutional Performance**

The funding of impact assessments can help microenterprise programs

- ! to define their strategic objectives;
- ! to design and deliver appropriate products that respond to client requirements;
- ! to retain clients (reduce turnover);
- ! to expand outreach;
- ! to improve portfolio quality;
- ! to mobilize funds; and
- ! to establish credibility.

Source: Sebstad 1998

Rapid evaluations were noted as being especially useful to the “improving” function of IAs. Specific examples of using IAs to evaluate savings policy, study drop-outs, and explore the profitability of different microenterprises were mentioned by one participant as having the potential to expeditiously provide information useful for improving provider services. In addition, several participants noted that IAs have paid too little attention to the possible negative impacts of programs. High interest rates, increased demands on time, and actual control of the credit were among the costs mentioned.

Participants shared information on costs of previous lower-cost IAs. The range extended from \$10,000 to \$65,000. A figure of \$100 per questionnaire for a three-country IA was also cited. However, the distinction needs to be drawn between financial costs of different stages of an IA: planning, design, implementation, analysis, and dissemination. As we seek to lower costs it will be necessary to provide these breakdowns. One participant pointed out that information dissemination can be costly, but is necessary if we want to share lessons-learned as well as establish guidelines for lower-cost studies.

Controversy surrounded a suggestion that IAs should be limited to only the larger MFIs which had demonstrated sustainability or were clearly moving in that direction. Several participants noted that some of the most successful MFIs today started small. Yet, size and sustainability of institutions also relates to the ability to pay for an IA; who should bear this cost, and what are the resource limits on conducting IAs within implementing organizations?

The institutional cost of an impact assessment also has implications in terms of the human capacity of the MFI. Practitioner-led assessments, as undertaken in Honduras, call for the use of in-house staff. Use of loan officers and managers to conduct IAs must be weighed in terms of the drain on staff time, the opportunity cost in terms of business not attended to and the benefits of improved program management. While participants recognized that external consultants can play an important role in practitioner-led assessments, the question remains: what should be the role of external



advisors?

The question of cost sharing between MFIs and donors for IAs remains an issue. Clearly, the larger the organization, the easier it is to absorb this cost. Moreover, if the IA serves an “improving” role and clients will benefit from improved services, is not the IA a part of doing business and ultimately should not these costs be passed on to the clients in a sustainable MFI?

**CONSENSUS POINT:** Build local capacity in conducting impact assessments, both internal and external to the microfinance institution.

## **TOWARD GUIDELINES**

“What are the key elements that should be incorporated into guidelines for impact assessments?” “What do we know about valid indicators of impacts?” These questions led off the discussion intended to move towards establishing guidelines for middle-range IAs. The discussion paper provided an overview, which participants continually referred to as a clear statement of guidelines that often needed no further elaboration. Numerous participants lauded the work and called for it to be used as a document which encompasses guidelines, best practices and substantial evidence from previous studies.

**CONSENSUS POINT:** The discussion paper should be used as guidance and a preliminary manual for middle-range IAs.

All IAs must be tailored to specific contextual circumstances; this is accepted as a basic premise guiding the development of guidelines for lower-cost impact assessment for microenterprise. The value of tailoring IAs to specific country and program conditions is well recognized. While some participants, strongly influenced by the convenience of existing microfinance performance guidelines, expressed an interest in a standardized baseline, this was rejected as inappropriate. There was support for developing broad guidelines which emphasize “best practices” and maximize the use of comparable studies, both within and between IAs.

Building a consensus among participants on a range of issues was the first step towards the development of general guidelines which would be appropriate for middle-range impact studies of microenterprise programs (see box 2). We must emphasize that these guidelines are not to be interpreted as imposed or rigid, but rather used as an aid in the planning, design, and implementation of impact assessments.

### **Box 2: Guidelines for Middle-Range Impact Assessments**

1. Use some form of time perspective.
2. Use some form of comparison group.
3. Tailor IAs to the specific context of the group being studied.
4. Begin with a small set of hypotheses and variables that have demonstrated validity in previous impact studies. Incorporate new hypotheses as appropriate.
5. Make greater use of IAs as a management tool for generating information that is useful in improving programs.
6. Employ methods to establish plausible association between changes experienced by clients and their participation in a microenterprise program.

Source: Sebstad 1998

With the opportunity to discuss the trade-offs and options for doing credible impact assessments while meeting our goals and objectives in a financially reasonable manner, participants in the virtual meeting agreed that the mystique surrounding the methodology of microenterprise impact assessment has become less daunting. There is general agreement that credible studies can be executed expeditiously and frugally. The broad guidelines and issues discussed during the meeting serve as a solid basis for prescribing methodologies that will yield useful lower-cost impact assessments.

## **CONCLUSION**

Some may feel these guidelines are too general. However, coming to agreement on such general issues is an important first step forward before delving into finer points of the specifics of lower-cost impact assessments. The very fact that there is strong consensus on the general issues makes this next step of refinement more attainable. It is clear from the above report that qualified agreement - with clarifications and refinements stated - was achieved in the virtual meeting on a wide variety of less-general, but related, issues which must be considered as we seek to arrive at a middle-range approach to impact assessment.

Consideration was also given to what should be the next steps for the CGAP Impact Methodologies Working Group. The discussion paper was judged to be more than simply a basis for discussion in this virtual meeting. It is a document that prescribes “best practices” for middle-range microenterprise impact assessment studies. This, together with the tentative guidelines, suggests that it would be timely to test the guidelines and then to convene another virtual meeting a year from now. That meeting would provide an opportunity to compare data and findings and

the impacts of different MFIs. The results of applying the guidelines would also be reviewed with the intent of refining them. A final step for the Working Group would be the preparation of a handbook/manual on the use of the guidelines. This would also bring closure to the agenda of the Working Group.

In looking forward, certain issues were recommended for more attention by CGAP and/or the members of its Working Groups. Some pertain to the implementation of credible impact assessments. They include the following:

- C train local technical staff on evaluation methodologies and issues for capacity building;
- C build a common set of variables and hypotheses that have demonstrated validity in IAs;
- C refine measures through testing proxy indicators of variables that are meaningful, but difficult to measure; and
- C construct a “model” questionnaire for collecting baseline data.

Other recommendations point to future areas of inquiry for this field. Here, much of the focus was on the relevance of an impact assessment for institutional performance. In addition, there were proposals to move impact assessment out of the marginal and operationally separate “accountability box” into “new” areas such as

- C examining the linkage between institutional performance of MFIs and the impact of microfinance programs;
- C analyzing the relationship between impact and different types of MFIs and different products; and
- C investing in one major in-depth study of cutting-edge issues: minimalist versus integrated credit and the plight of the ultra-poor.

## ANNEX 1

### BACKGROUND PAPERS SUBMITTED FOR THE APRIL 1998 CGAP IMPACT WORKING GROUP VIRTUAL MEETING

- Bruntrup, M. S.M. Alauddin, A. Huda, M. Rahman. 1997. Impact Assessment of the Association for Social Advancement (ASA). Volume 1 Main Report.
- Chua, Ronald T. 1997. Impact of Access to Credit on the Poor: A Research Design and Baseline Study. Brisbane: Foundation for Development Cooperation.
- Chua, Ronald T. 1998. The Performance and Sustainability of Two Philippine Microfinance Institutions: An Assessment. Brisbane: Foundation for Development Cooperation.
- Edgcomb, Elaine L. and Carter Garber. 1998. Practitioner-Led Impact Assessment: A Test in Honduras. AIMS Project. Washington, D.C.: Management Systems International.
- Espegren, Oddvar. 1997. Microfinance Impact Assessment: A Dynamic Dialogue Approach. M.A. Dissertation submitted to the School of Development Studies of the University of East Anglia.
- Gheen, William. 1998. Review and Summary of Consultant's Report, Survey Results, Ecuador. Inter-American Development Bank.
- Holvoet, Nathalie. 1998. Intrahousehold Resource Allocation Processes and Their Outcomes: Impact of Credit and Women Groups. Case Study for Rural North Tamil Nadu. General Outlook and Design of the Case Study. College voor de Ontwikkelingslanden, RUCA.
- Husain, A.M. Muazzam. 1997. Poverty Alleviation and Empowerment. An Impact Assessment Study on BRAC's Rural Development Programme (IAS). Dhaka: BRAC Research and Evaluation Division.
- Ouattara, Korotoumou, Genevieve Thi-Dieu-Phuong Nguyen, Claudio Gonzalez-Vega, and Douglas H. Graham. 1997. The Caisses Villageoises D'epargne et de Credit Autogerees in the Dogon Region of Mali: Elements of Impact. Centre International de Developpement et de Recherche (CIDR) and Ohio State University.

## ANNEX 2

### LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

<b>Country</b>	<b>Name and Affiliation</b>
Australia	Kieren Donaghue, Australian Agency for International Development (AUSAID)
Australia	Paul McGuire, The Foundation for Development Cooperation
Australia	Valerie Sapin, Microfinance Consultant
Bangladesh	Hassan Zaman, Senior Economist, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC)
Belgium	Nathalie Holvoet, Institute for Development Policy and Management
Belgium	Sean Conlin, European Commission (EC)
Canada	Harbinder Kaur, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)
Canada	Sue Szabo, Aga Khan Foundation
Columbia	William Cartier, Coordinador de Evaluacion Fundacion Corona
Ethiopia	Jennefer Sebstad, Management Systems International (MSI) Consultant
France	Renee Chao-Beroff, Centre International de Developpement et de Recherche (CIDR)
France	Pascale Le Roy, Groupe de Recherche et d'Echanges Technologiques (GRET)
France	Betty Wampfler, DSFR/AF/CIRAD-TERA
Germany	Harald Huttenrauch, KFW
India	Ela Bhatt, SEWA
Japan	Akiko Nakagawa, Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund (OECF)
Mozambique	Elizabeth Rhyne, Microfinance Consultant
Netherlands	Coen van Beuningen, HIVOS
Netherlands	Mark van der Voet, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Norway	Arne Wiig Namibian Economic Policy Research Unit (NEPRU), Namibia/CMI
Philippines	Ronald Chua, Asian Institute of Management
Switzerland	Berndt Balkenhol, International Labor Organization (ILO)
Switzerland	Haje Schutte, International Labor Organization (ILO)
U.K.	Graeme Buckley, Department for International Development (DFID)

U.S.	Hege Gulli, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)
U.S.	William Gheen, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)
U.S.	Osvaldo Feinstein, The World Bank
U.S.	Brigit Helms, Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest (CGAP)
U.S.	John Tucker, United Nations Development Program (UNDP)
U.S.	Susan Gibson, United Nations Development Program (UNDP)
U.S.	Deena Burjorjee, United Nations Development Program (UNDP)
U.S.	Iain Beattie, United Nations Development Program (UNDP)
U.S.	Elaine Edgcomb, The Small Enterprise Education and Promotion Network (SEEP)
U.S.	Monique Cohen, United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
U.S.	Carolyn Barnes, Management Systems International (MSI)
U.S.	Gary Gaile, Management Systems International (MSI) Consultant